



## Parent Partners: The Voice of Experience for Child Welfare—Involved Families



*Denise Moore, Parent Partner Coordinator, Des Moines Service Area (left)*



*Judy Norris, Community Coordinator, Court Teams for Maltreated Infants and Toddlers Project, Polk County, IA (right)*

**Summary:** The authors describe how the “Parent Partners” program supported a court-involved mother who was struggling to comply with court orders and case plans and maintain sobriety.

Parents who have just lost custody of their children approach child welfare professionals apprehensively. Based on many prior life experiences, parents feel mistrust, confusion and, at times, hostility toward the people involved in building or restoring their children’s safety and well-being.

When Denise’s children were removed, she was at the height of her addiction and using/dealing lifestyle. Deep down she knew she was out of control and in an emotional and physical void as a mother. When her children were taken from her, she had no idea when and if she would see them. Scared and alone, she appeared in court only to be told by the professionals, including her own attorney, that it wasn’t likely her children would ever come back to her. She left court, unsure and vulnerable, feeling as though it was her against the world. None of the people around her had any idea what this loss felt like, yet they expected her to jump through all the “system hoops” in order to get her kids back. Not only was Denise embarking on a scary, unfamiliar journey, but no one who expected her to complete these tasks had any idea how she had gotten into the dangerous situation she and her family were confronting. No one knew or asked what had happened to her in her own past to get her to the place where she was now.

After her five children were removed, Denise spent a full year struggling with her substance abuse. But she was lucky; she had DHS social workers and an in-home worker who gave her every opportunity to become accountable for her actions. With termination of her parental rights on the horizon, she faced her children with the news that she had again relapsed. When she looked into her oldest son’s eyes she knew she couldn’t disappoint her children again. The next week in court she asked for one more chance.

Denise’s story is all too familiar to parents navigating the child welfare system angry, alone and fearful of what their future holds, even when professionals offer the most sincere support. In 2007, after attending a conference on parent mentoring sponsored by Casey Family Programs, representatives of Polk County Department of Human Services partnered with ZERO TO THREE and a parent who successfully closed her child welfare case to start the “Parent Partner” parent mentor program in Des Moines. Supported by technical assistance from Casey Family Programs, they developed an extensive training program. Polk County DHS provided limited funding for planning and the first training series.

Parent Partner are recruited by professionals who have worked with them. Prospective Parent Partners must have closed their cases and be practicing sobriety for at least a period of one year before being assigned to work with a parent. During this period of extended sobriety, they must complete 10 separate trainings, including DHS 101 and domestic violence advocacy training. As a potential Parent Partner goes through the training series, a number of professionals act as an advisory group, including a contracted licensed mental health professional who constantly evaluates the mentor’s well-being and sobriety.

A Parent Partner is introduced to the family entering the child welfare system at the point of the pre-removal conference where DHS staff, parents and family members make a plan to reduce the trauma of the children’s imminent removal. At this point a Parent Partner is the only person in the room who can say to the parents: “I have been in your shoes. I know it’s scary, but I made it through and so can you. I am right by your side to give you any support you need to navigate through the system.”

made it through and so can you. I am right by your side to give you any support you need to navigate through the system. Should the parent decide to accept this supportive relationship, the Parent Partner gives the parent her telephone number and begins developing a bond around their common experiences. The Parent Partner is by the parent's side through appointments, court, treatment and self-sustainability or until the parent states he no longer needs the support.

After the first potential Parent Partners were identified in 2007, Polk County launched the training program. Denise was one of the first Parent Partners to go through the training and complete the required probationary period. Within a two year period, Parent Partners became an effective means of helping families navigate the child welfare system. The Department of Human Services placed Parent Partners under their agency umbrella and committed money for expansion.

Parent Partners have become a critical part of the child welfare professional community. Their input is requested as new initiatives are created to improve the delivery of services to families. Denise is now the regional coordinator for the Parent Partner Program, which is expanding to the entire Des Moines service area, including 15 counties. Parent Partners can carry caseloads of 10–15 families. Three lead Parent Partners act in a supervisory role. Parent Partners have played a critical role in changing the landscape and mindset of people involved in the child welfare system—families and professionals.

#### **Author biographies:**

Judy Norris has more than 20 years of experience in serving youth and families in child welfare and juvenile justice. Since 2005, she has been the Polk County, Iowa Community Coordinator for the Court Teams for Maltreated Infants and Toddlers Project. In that position, Norris works with Polk County's five juvenile court judges to implement expedited and enhanced services for infants and toddlers in foster care. She also facilitates coordination and collaboration among community stakeholders on the Des Moines ZERO TO THREE Team and is responsible for implementing the local evaluation plan and participating in the national evaluation activities for the Court Teams Project.

Previous professional work has included program development and supervisory oversight in youth serving organizations in Iowa. She has been active in various advisory committees and boards including the Gender Specific Task Force, Juvenile Fire Setting Coalition, Parents as Partners, Child Abuse Prevention Council and the Drug Endangered Children Multidisciplinary Team. She is a member of Polk County Model Court.

**Denise Moore** is the Des Moines Service Area Parent Partner coordinator. She is a master trainer for the "Building A Better Future" curriculum and trains Parent Partners, systems and community members both across the state and nationally. She assisted in the development of the "Working With Parents" curriculum for the Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association and is a trainer for the association's "Breaking Barriers: Working Effectively with Birth Families" curriculum. She speaks locally, across the state of Iowa and nationally about the need for child welfare systems to work more effectively with birth parents. She was a faculty member on the Iowa team for the Casey Family Programs "Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Reducing Racial Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes for Children and Families of Color in the Child Welfare System." In 2011 she received the *Ruth Massinga/Casey Excellence for Children Birth Parent of the Year Award* from Casey Family Programs for her exceptional service and commitment to birth parents.

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